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AUTHOR Martindale, Carolyn
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine whether newspaper coverage of black Americans diminished after the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and whether new images of blacks have begun to emerge in the media. Items concerning black Americans in 66 issues each of the "New York Times," "Boston Globe," "Chicago Tribune," and "Atlanta Constitution" were coded. The issues were taken from time periods before, during, and after the Civil Rights Movement. Coverage was coded into categories for stereotypes, everyday life, civil rights, and minority life. Sixteen subcategories were also identified. Results indicated that stereotypical portrayals of blacks as criminals and entertainment or sports figures comprised a substantial portion of the four newspapers' coverage of blacks in the 1950s. The percentages dropped considerably during the 1960s, but rose again during the 1970s. A new image of blacks as politicians began appearing in coverage during the 1970s. Findings also determined that these newspapers are moving toward a more equitable portrayal of blacks in the news but that elements of stereotypes still linger. (Tables of data and 17 references are included.) (AEW)

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Changes in Newspaper Images of Black Americans

by

Carolyn Martindale

Director, Journalism Program
English Department
Youngstown State University
Youngstown, Ohio

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Changes in Newspaper Images of Black Americans

Stereotypical coverage has been widely recognized as a basic cause of distortions in the press portrayal of black Americans. For many years blacks have claimed that newspapers presented blacks primarily as criminals or--to a lesser extent--as sports or entertainment figures. Empirical studies of coverage of black Americans in the first two-thirds of this century have borne out these claims. What has not been so extensively studied is whether new images of blacks have emerged in newspaper coverage since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and whether the old stereotypes are still present in press coverage of American blacks.

Joseph Boskin defines a stereotype as a standardized mental picture that represents an oversimplified opinion "that is staggeringly tenacious in its hold over rational thinking." He adds that ever since slavery was institutionalized in this country in the seventeenth century, whites have perpetuated a dual image of the black man as either a savage--violent, sexually rapacious, dangerous--or a Sambo--lazy, stupid, feckless, and carefree.[1]

Empirical studies of pre-Civil Rights Movement press coverage of black Americans have revealed a heavy emphasis on coverage that fits the stereotypical images Boskin describes. Simpson, in a study of black news in the Philadelphia press

between 1908 and 1932, found that 52% to 74% of the total coverage given to blacks was devoted to accounts of crimes committed by blacks.[2] Gist discovered that 47% of news about blacks in 17 major American newspapers during 1928-29 concerned antisocial behavior.3

Johnson studied coverage of blacks in Oregon newspapers between 1931 and 1945 and found it was limited to black crime and entertainment and sports personalities.[4] Tatro's study of local news coverage of blacks in five Deep South papers indicated that news about black crime accounted for 50% of the coverage in 1950 and 29 percent in 1970.[5] A study by Johnson, Sears and McConahay of news about blacks showed that stereotypical coverage comprised about 17% of the Los Angeles Times' coverage of black Americans between 1940 and 1966.[6]

Edward Jones, explaining the self-reinforcing nature of stereotypes, says that "people seek to confirm their expectations and resist contradictory evidence, so we cling to beliefs and stereotypes become self-fulfilling."[7] Thus people tend to screen out information that does not conform to their expectations, and to focus on material that reinforces their beliefs.

A problem with this situation is that white editors, who like all white Americans are to some degree affected by the dual stereotype of blacks, may unconsciously convert the stereotype into a sort of grid, or framework, through which news about blacks is filtered. Hartmann and Husband have theorized the existence of such a framework for news, suggesting that items which conform to the expected pattern get published, while those

that do not get screened out.[8]

During the Civil Rights Movement many American newspaper editors went through a period of intense self-examination concerning their papers' coverage of black Americans, and became aware of the press tendency toward stereotypical coverage of blacks. Gradually editors have largely eliminated the most overt distortions in their coverage of blacks, but deeply buried stereotypical images of blacks can still cause them to measure black news against their unconscious expectations.

Some indicators suggest that stereotypes of blacks still exercise considerable power. Dorothy Gilliam reported in 1972 that a black columnist complained that "It's easier to get a piece in on the Panthers or a street gang than on a block club or community news."[9] In 1977, when blacks and Hispanics engaged in looting and firebombing during a blackout in New York City, the most commonly used term to describe the looters was "animals," Boskin reports.[10] A black reporter stated in 1984 that at the beginning of Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign, most white editors dismissed Jackson as "just a preacher who talked in rhymes" and who could not deal with complex issues.[11]

Although these comments reflect the old savage-Sambo stereotype, one of the few empirical studies dealing with stereotypical images in news coverage since the Civil Rights Movement suggested some new images of blacks may be appearing in the press. Sentman studied coverage of black Americans in Life magazine, and found that although crime, sports and entertainment accounted for considerable portions of Life's coverage during the

years studied, during 1972 most of the coverage featured blacks who had become prominent through sports, entertainment, politics or social protest activities (italics added).[12]

This paper is drawn from a larger project undertaken to analyze coverage of black Americans in four major newspapers before, during and after the Civil Rights Movement. This study's aim was to determine whether stereotypical coverage of blacks diminished after the Movement, and whether new images began to emerge. The research questions were (1) How much stereotypical coverage of black Americans did the newspapers present before, during and after the Civil Rights Movement? and (2) Did images of blacks in the newspapers change over the years studied?

Design of the Study

The newspapers chosen for study were the New York Times, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune and Atlanta Constitution. These papers were selected because they are resource-rich, influential papers which might have been expected to take a lead in correcting some of the coverage inadequacies that journalists acknowledged during the 1960s, and because they represent different geographical areas of the country. (Coverage of black Americans by the Los Angeles Times, another possible choice, had already been studied through 1966 by Johnson, Sears and McConahay.)

The papers chosen also are located in cities that experienced serious ghetto riots during the 1960s, and that have very different percentages of blacks in their populations, from

New York with 25% to Atlanta with 67%, according to the 1980 census.[13]

Items concerning black Americans in 66 issues of each newspaper were coded. The issues examined were drawn randomly from a stratified sample of months of the year, weeks of the months and days of the week during selected years of the period studied.

The first portion of coverage sampled was taken from the four years from 1950 through 1953, to obtain a picture of the papers' coverage of blacks before the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum and the resulting direct action tactics commanded more press attention to blacks than had previously occurred. The next sample issues were taken from the six years from 1963 through 1968, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. The final group of sample issues was drawn from the years 1972 through 1980, after the confrontational activities of the Civil Rights Movement had ceased and papers had had time to begin implementing the coverage improvement strategies suggested in the 1960s.

The sample included three issues a year per newspaper for the four-year period studied in the early 1950s, four issues a year for the six years examined in the 1960s, and six issues a year for the five years from the 1970s. Because of the inaccessibility of issues for some of the sample dates, the total sample size was 245 issues.

The recording unit was any newspaper item--news or feature story, editorial or opinion column, letter to the editor, photo

or cartoon--that concerned American blacks or events involving or directly affecting blacks. An instrument for coding the coverage into categories was devised, and included 16 subcategories that were grouped into four main categories. Each sample issue was scanned and all pertinent items noted, measured and assigned to the appropriate subcategory on the basis of the topic of the item. Items in the sports sections of the papers were not studied, because the focus of the study was general news coverage of blacks.

All column inch measurements were converted to a column width of 2.25 inches to facilitate comparisons among the newspapers and across time periods.

The first of the four main categories into which the items were coded was stereotypic coverage, and included the subcategories of crimes committed by blacks and entertainment/ sports figures. The second main category was everyday life, and this included subcategories of items that showed blacks as part of the normal life of the community. These included community activities, individual achievements, political activities, black officeholders, disasters and interracial violence.

The third main category, civil rights, included subcategories of coverage concerned with the black struggle for equality, such as black protests, riots, white resistance to integration, civil rights gains, and other civil rights-related news. The fourth category was minority life, and included the subcategories of black problems and housing programs.

Two persons not involved in the study each independently

coded four sample issues that included at least 22 items. Intercoder reliability was estimated on Holsti's formula, which divides agreed-upon subcategory assignments by the number of assignments made.[14] Intercoder reliability was 0.86.

Findings

Table 1 shows various subcategories of coverage as a percentage of the total coverage of black Americans in each newspaper for each time period studied. This table makes clear that stereotypical portrayals of blacks as criminals and entertainment or sports figures comprised a substantial portion of the newspapers' coverage of blacks in the 1950s issues studied.

During this period, stereotypical coverage represented 47% of the Chicago Tribune's coverage of black Americans, 22% of the Atlanta Constitution's, 10% of the New York Times', and none of the Boston Globe's, which barely covered blacks at all. In the case of the New York Times, most of this stereotypical coverage was of black entertainment figures, but in the Tribune and the Constitution the overwhelming majority of the coverage consisted of accounts of crimes committed by blacks.

During the 1960s, when civil rights-related news dominated coverage of black Americans, these percentages dropped to 6% or less in all the papers except the Tribune, which still ran 17% of stereotypical coverage, all of it crime news.

But in the 1970s issues sampled stereotypical coverage had risen again from its 1960s level, and represented between 14% and

Table 1

Mean Number of Column Inches Per Issue and Percentage of Coverage of Black Americans in Selected Subcategories of Coverage by Four Newspapers During Three Time Periods

Time Period	Subcategory of Coverage	Newspaper			
		NYT	AC	BG	CT
Early 1950s	Total Coverage	18.33	22.58	4.55	32.00
	Criminal Activities	0.33 (2%)	4.42 (20%)		13.08 (41%)
	Entertainment Figures	1.50 (8%)	0.42 (2%)		1.92 (6%)
	Protesters	0.50 (3%)	0.42 (2%)		0.25 (1%)
	Politicians		0.50 (2%)		
Mid-1960s	Total Coverage	147.63	75.77	66.14	102.59
	Criminal Activities	2.33 (2%)	3.60 (5%)	1.40 (2%)	16.89 (17%)
	Entertainment Figures	4.58 (3%)	0.68 (1%)	1.40 (2%)	
	Protesters	26.33 (18%)	10.17 (13%)	15.60 (24%)	9.18 (9%)
	Politicians	10.08 (7%)	5.74 (8%)	2.56 (4%)	4.22 (4%)
1970s	Total Coverage	96.98	88.48	86.85	79.83
	Criminal Activities	4.74 (5%)	11.85 (13%)	3.01 (3%)	4.76 (6%)
	Entertainment Figures	8.56 (9%)	3.71 (5%)	4.30 (5%)	7.32 (9%)
	Protesters	0.86 (1%)	0.82 (1%)	1.03 (1%)	0.79 (1%)
	Politicians	13.30 (14%)	17.78 (20%)	6.95 (8%)	8.40 (11%)

18% of each paper's coverage of blacks except in the Globe, where it accounted for 8% of the paper's black coverage. In all of the papers except the Constitution, however, well over half of the papers' coverage in the stereotypical category in this period consisted of coverage of black entertainment figures rather than crime news.

In the 1960s issues studied, a clear picture of blacks as protesters was presented. Table 1 shows the newspapers' coverage in the black protest subcategory. This coverage, although miniscule in the 1950s and 1970s issues studied, during the 1960s represented 24% of the Globe's coverage of blacks, 18% of the New York Times', 13% of the Constitution's, and 9% of the Tribune's. Besides the coverage coded into this category, many glimpses of blacks as protesters were found in stories on other subjects, such as stories on white resistance to integration, riot coverage, accounts of white leaders calling for integration, and other civil rights-related stories. Readers of the papers during this period received a strong impression of blacks as activist protesters.

A new image of blacks began appearing in the coverage presented in the 1970s issues coded, and this was the picture of blacks as politicians. In Table 1 the black politician rows present each newspaper's combined coverage from two subcategories--local (black) officeholders at work, and political activities, which consisted largely of coverage of black political figures from other areas of the country and nationally.

This kind of coverage, of blacks as political activists, was

almost nonexistent in the 1950s issues studied, began growing in the 1960s coverage, and reached substantial proportions in the 1970s issues coded. In this latter period, coverage of black politicians accounted for 20% of the Constitution's coverage of blacks, 14% of the Times', 11% of the Tribune's, and 8% of the Globe's.

Discussion

It seems clear that the heavy emphasis given to stereotypical coverage of blacks, especially black crime, by the Chicago Tribune and Atlanta Constitution in the 1950s issues coded can be explained only by the presence of racial stereotypes in the minds of the editors who served as gatekeepers for the news. This is especially obvious when the coverage is considered against the knowledge that white newspaper editors tend to slight crimes committed in black inner city neighborhoods, because they feel that such occurrences there are routine, not news.[15] When the black population of Chicago was 14% in 1950, and the Tribune devoted 41% of its coverage of blacks in the 1950s issues coded to black crime, this situation must have arisen from editors' belief in the "savage" stereotype of blacks. It must also have reinforced that same stereotype in readers' minds.

The 1970s increase in stereotypical coverage from the 1960s level seems at first a negative sign, but in all the papers except the Constitution more than half of this type of coverage concerned entertainment or, in a few cases, sports figures. Thus in most of the papers the image of blacks as criminals

represented a very small percentage of the coverage of blacks during the 1970s. This finding indicates that, at least in the coverage presented by the newspapers studied, the old stereotypes of black Americans are beginning to lose their sway.

The black protest coverage that swelled during the 1960s represents a new image of black Americans and one that is, to some extent, simply a reflection of reality. Confrontational direct action and demonstrations were frequent during this period, and naturally commanded press attention.

At the same time, however, this image of blacks contained elements of the "savage" stereotype, presenting blacks as aggressive, demanding and unpredictable. Because the papers tended to present the protests as isolated news events, without historical context that would have explained the causes of the protests, the black image that emerged carried overtones of unreasonableness, pushiness and anger.[16] Coverage that focused on blacks demonstrating, making demands, and warning of "a long, hot summer" ahead if their demands were not met must inevitably have contributed to white readers' fear of blacks, especially in view of the inner city riots that occurred in the second half of the 1960s. Thus the black protester image carried connotations similar to the black criminal stereotype.

The black politician image, like the black protester image, also has a solid basis in reality. During the 1970s many more blacks were elected to school boards and city councils, as mayors, and to state legislatures and Congress. The upsurge in black politican coverage was therefore not surprising, and this

image of blacks does not seem to carry the negative associations of the usual stereotypical images.

Some of the local black politician coverage does have a negative implication, however. Some observers believe that just as whites have abandoned the cities to blacks and other minorities as places in which to live, white politicans on the local through the national level have abandoned some major cities and their huge problems to black political leaders.[17] Thus the problems of the blacks who try to run these cities could come to be regarded by white editors as relatively unworthy of attention in the same way that the problems of the people who live in the inner city tend to be ignored by the press.

While the black politician image in itself does not carry negative connotations like the dual "savage-Sambo" stereotype, it does have some disturbing implications for coverage of black Americans in general. If unconsciously held stereotypes do form a framework against which editors measure news, so that editors screen out items which do not conform to the framework, then a new stereotype or mental image of blacks as politicians could result in an overemphasis on news that fits this image and a slighting of other items that could present a more varied and accurate picture of black Americans. In this sense any stereotype, even a positive one, can inhibit truly representational coverage of any minority group.

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